**Krisztina Palotás (host):**

Hello and welcome to another episode of the charming Podcast. I am Krisztina Palotás, and I will be the host of today's episode; here with me today is Ágnes Sarolta Fazekas to discuss all things related to inclusivity in the higher education sector. Thank you very much for joining me today.

**Ágnes Sarolta Fazekas (guest):**

Thank you so much for having me.

**Krisztina Palotás (host):**

To start things off, I'd love for our listeners to learn a bit about your background, so could you please tell us a little bit about yourself, your journey and what brought you to the field of inclusion and diversity.

**Ágnes Sarolta Fazekas (guest):**

Thank you so much, of course. So, my name is Ágnes Sarolta Fazekas; I'm an assistant professor, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Bárczi Gusztáv Faculty of Special Needs Education, Institute for Disability and Social Participation. And I am the CHARM-EU Work Package 6 (Inclusiveness) leader, and I'm delighted to share with you more.

And I have a long journey, and I'm delighted to be here with CHARM. During this couple of years. So, my journey started back in elementary school, and I am highlighting these because I was born with a disability. I have shorter arms, but it didn't cause any problem or any difficulties thanks to my family, my teachers and all the surrounding people, friends, and also colleagues and teachers in the education sector. So, just to highlight, I participated in mainstream education, and I continued my studies in high school. And then in the university. I studied the Social Sciences at the university, specifically sociology as a bachelor and social policy as a master. And during this time, I was very curious about the structures in society, and also the how the inequality is how the society structures, what are the barriers and the enablers.

And then, I joined the Erasmus Student Network (**Agnes added it only in the transcript:** <https://esn.org/>). When I started university as a bachelor student, and with this extra-curricular activity from the really beginning, I was supporting international students, and it was my real passion. I'm happy to tell you that for over ten years, I have been working with these International Youth organisations, and internationalisation was really close to my heart.

And what was wonderful, over the years that back in the days in 2011, I had a chance to participate in an international program supported by the European Commission ExchangeAbility (**Agnes added it only in the transcript**: <https://www.elte.hu/en/equal/exchangeability>). And this project was not only fostering the mobility of students with disabilities, but this was the very first big project in Europe in terms of focusing on underrepresented students in higher education and mobility.

And as I was mentioning that I studied sociology and social policy, I was really curious about the structures and the policies and the practices of this mobility. So basically, I joined my passion for international students support with my academic background, and I conducted research on inclusive mobility. This was basically the starting point of my journey of my international activities, projects, and the academic field.

And to continue this in a rapid way. I was participating in different organisational units in our in different European projects to work towards a more inclusive higher education and also in terms of a more inclusive internationalisation, so I have been working with several organisations, including the Council of Europe in the youth field, including the European Commission and the National Agency Working Group, supporting the mobility of underrepresented students and specifically students with disabilities. And I've been involved in the European Association for International Education (EAIE), the access and diversity expert community, between 2018 and 2020. I was the chair of this group, and now I am currently the General Council member of the EAIE. And all of these extra-curricular activities, volunteer activities I really highlight brought me to the CHARM-EU; it was my honour to be involved and lead the inclusiveness working group.

**Krisztina Palotás (host):**

Thank you know this sounds like an absolutely outstanding journey, and also, I think it really shows that this is your passion and, and this is why you're doing this. It is an honour for me to have you as our work package leader of inclusivity, so thank you so much for all the work you do with your work package. And just to specify, what would you say inclusion and diversity personally meet you?

**Ágnes Sarolta Fazekas (guest):**

Thank you so much for this question. So, I always highlight to my colleagues whenever I speak at conferences that inclusion is a very broad concept for me. So, it's not only specific for one target group, or one group, one type of group of people, but I think about inclusion and diversity in a very holistic way, so it's a very broad and complex way.

So, I brought this idea to the CHARM-EU that we should embrace the diversity of individuals. We should first of all respect, recognise and celebrate the richness of diversity that people bring to the CHARM-EU you and, in general, to a variety of spaces in society. So, this is my understanding, and I would like to highlight two things. Diversity, sometimes in the past, was something that it is considered as a burden or something, something difficult, but I would like to highlight that we should consider diversity as a default; we should celebrate it. And we should, as you say, understand the richness of that what diversity brings to us and how it can enrich us in every sector in every space in society and also in higher education.

When it comes to inclusion, inclusion is something that we should work towards together, so it's not only one person's job or is not only that the target audience is working towards inclusion, but it requires a systematic change. It requires that everyone works together towards inclusion. So, it's not only that the, let's say the target audience, trying to fit the mainstream environment, but the environment needs to work on the settings, needs to question what are the barriers and what are the enablers in the settings, whether it's the higher education landscape whether is the teaching and learning environment, etc. Whether it's the public transport, or, or anything in the built environment, so, it requires a mutual work. And together, working towards a more inclusive environment that it's really focusing on this richness that diversity of people brings to the table.

**Krisztina Palotás (host):**

I've personally been thinking a lot about diversity recently. How amazing it is that we are so diverse in the world and how it's something that we should absolutely celebrate. It's, it's just something very close to my heart, and I'm really happy that charming us is approaching this with so much consideration.

And so, obviously, the history of higher education had a great impact on our practices today. What would you, what would you mention as the most significant events that produce the current situation in the higher education sector?

**Ágnes Sarolta Fazekas (guest):**

Thank you so much, so it's important to look back what is our history, and what is our current present and what we can look into the future. So, as you probably know the history has been changing, and especially in the second half of the 20th century brought that brought a lot of changes in general in society, and also in the field of higher education.

It means that, basically, new groups have entered higher education. We also know from history that women's participation was a big change in education, specifically in higher education. And later on, more and more groups who were not part of the so-called "traditional" higher education audience joined later on. We also know that people with disabilities had more access, and it was a gradual step, a lot of civil rights movement, we're supporting this change a lot of legislations, a lot of changes after the Second World War. We also recognise it around the world. The veteran community who were returning from the wars wanted to see how they could contribute to society, so it was again a new demand to enter education, support employment, etc.

And it was also the same for underrepresented groups who were not part of the audience. And we can read and look over the historical changes that how it has been moved. And I'm very happy to say that also in the early 90s, a lot of legislative changes have been put in place than the UN Convention, have been put in place. Especially recognising putting the universal right to education, and as well. Recognising that what we need to do in order to achieve more inclusive education.

So, I just highlight in one sentence that a lot of changes have been happening; the higher education landscape has been diversified in terms of that how diverse is the student population, including staff, so I'm not always talking about students but also the community of higher education has been diversified. We also recognise a massive vacation in terms of the numbers. As you can see, if we look back in the 19th-century classical tradition, universities, and now we are looking, what is the 20th century and the 21st century brought us, it's a big change.

And just to have some facts and figures. The world conference on higher education of the UNESCO is highlighting that we need to step up and embrace the changes that it brings us new demands in terms of the diversified audience, and we need to be up for this challenge,

**Krisztina Palotás (host):**

And it's great to see these changes. I think obviously it's where we're living in one of the changes now, I think. But it's good to see what has brought these changes on demand for it and finally being recognised and the change actually approaching the higher education sector. And specifically, what were the lessons the successes or failures from the last 10 years or so that you say that we can learn from?

**Ágnes Sarolta Fazekas (guest):**

Hmm. So, definitely, there were a lot of successes and sometimes barriers. So, what I can highlight is that what we learned from these changes as I was quickly going through the centuries is that we had, like, a setting, whether it's the higher education environment or any other space in society. We have settings where we are invited and when the new groups join, and new groups of people join. So, what is a barrier at the moment is that the end when these were talking specifically about higher education that the higher education landscape, even the buildings or the teaching and learning environment was not designed towards this diversity.

So, it is something that we were adjusting the current structures the current circumstances to make a more inclusive space, but it was, again, like as I was saying that that new groups enter, and now we need to see what we can adjust and fix basically in the current system I give you a very simple example. So when new groups entered, for example, a person who is using a wheelchair, and then a classical building had only a chair steps. So, now, there were a lot of changes in how to adjust and fix the environment to be more inclusive to more accessible. So, these are the barriers that we are facing that the inclusive design was not part of this because it's like a historical change in how we embrace the diversity of individuals and bring them to the settings.

So, it was a fixing afterwards challenge. So, this is it. But what I'm very happy and very delighted to see as a success is that now, together with people with their own lived experiences, their own access needs. We are creating the dialogue; we are creating changes. We are creating a space for discussions and spaces for highlighting that what are the barriers. So now, together with all kinds of voices, creating awareness is what is difficult in society or what is a barrier in the higher education environment.

So, now is the success is that now we are joining forces we hearing out, the people who have their own needs and their own experiences. And we are learning from these. So, bringing in the voices from all around the world and all around from the people who had previously, let's say in the 19th century if we go back way back, back that way. We are bringing these needs, we are bringing these voices, and we are collaborating to make it a more inclusive and also more human-centred approach, more needs tailored approach. And, again, creating the environment that it caters to needs to the greatest extent possible.

**Krisztina Palotás (host):**

Yeah, I think what you mentioned about listening to people who have lived experiences, combined with the people who might not have had experiences yet but are they kind of know what they're looking for. I think the combination of those two is going to create a lot of success within this field, so I'm really excited to see that.